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Ballot Initiative #2: Opening Day of School

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Ballot initiative #2:

Opening day of school



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Opening day of school

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South Dakota voters will decide the fate of four ballot issues in the upcoming November 6th election. Ballot Initiative 2 is a measure dealing with the starting date for South Dakota elementary and secondary schools.

A "yes" vote on this initiative prevents local school boards from starting the school year prior to Labor Day. A "no" vote allows local school boards to start the school year at local choice with no statewide limitations on starting before or after Labor Day.

Content of the initiative

There is one section to the initiated measure that will be printed on the ballot. This section includes the following concepts:

Be it enacted by the people of South Dakota: That South Dakota Codified Law 13-26-2 be amended to read as follows:

The school board shall operate the schools for at least a nine-month regular term in any one year. Such regular school term shall consist of school actually in session for a minimum of one hundred seventy-five days. However, the days in session plus days of legal school discontinuance need not exceed one hundred ninety days. The first day of school may not be set prior to the first Tuesday following the first Monday in September. A school board may operate a special term during the summer months.

Comparison to present law

The amendment proposal is essentially identical to present South Dakota Codified Law 13-26-2, **except** that it adds one sentence. That additional sentence is: "The first day of school may not be set prior to the first Tuesday following the first Monday in September."

Questions that come up

When did school start last year?

During the 1983-84 school year, 8 out of the 195 school districts in South Dakota officially started after Labor Day, 34 started the week before Labor Day, 147 districts started prior to the week before Labor Day, and 6 districts had dates set by out-of-state districts.

Six of the post-Labor Day districts were in the Black Hills area and two were in the Huron State Fair area. In total, these 8 districts accounted for 20,060 students or 16% of the total 123,500 local public school students in the state.

Who should decide when school starts?

Passage of this initiative means that voters would be setting statewide limits on the starting date for the school year. Defeat of this initiative means that local school boards would continue to keep full responsibility for setting the start of the school year for their respective schools.

So, the issue involves a choice between state voter preferences and control versus school district preferences and control.

When should the school year start?

Passage or defeat of Ballot Initiative 2 has consequences for time management out-of-school as well as in-school scheduling.

Much of the interest in a post-Labor Day start of school comes from those involved in out-of-school, late summer activities. Many students and families wish to schedule vacations, sports tournaments, and other activities in late August.

South Dakota tourism employs many teenagers, and the heavier half of the tourism season is late summer. The season officially closes on Labor Day. Official numbers of school children actually employed in the tourism industry are not available. Ballpark estimates, based on Census data, range from 1% to 3% of the public school students in the state.

Because of scheduling difficulties, the South Dakota State Fair is usually held the week prior to Labor Day. Approximately 3,100 to 4,000 4-Hers and other youth participate in State Fair contests. This represents about 3% of the public school students in the state.

In addition, some farm families wish to have their children home to help on the farm prior to Labor Day.

Those elementary and high school students who wish to

participate in pre-Labor Day activities must forego such activities or miss the first days of the school year—unless they are from a district that chooses to start later.

The number of days or hours required for a school year is not altered by the ballot initiative. So, if we want our children out of school at a certain time of the year, we may have to trade that period for another portion of the year.

If we want late summer activities, there are only a limited number of options available. First, districts could give up early summer activities, including farm work done in the spring. Second, districts could give up school year vacation days. Third, districts could give up any planned school days in excess of the minimum 175 days or 962.5 hours required by law. Finally, districts could go to longer school hours in each school day, thus shortening the school year; that flexibility is presently available.

How are in-school activities affected?

School-organized outdoor activities may be affected by

rescheduling of the school starting date.

In some cases, extra-curricular activities and sports may start before the first day of classes. In other cases, however, such activities are tied to the start of the school year. So, depending upon the time management option selected by the district, some fall outdoor activities may be shortened and spring outdoor activities lengthened, if this amendment is passed.

As for classroom scheduling, some elementary and secondary teachers prefer three or four school days prior to the three-day Labor Day weekend to "ease" the students into the structured school routine and to provide a vacation break between the days when class rules are established and the days when academic productivity begins. However, it must be pointed out that the relationship between academic progress and the start of school has not been proved or disproved.

Other teachers may prefer starting school after Labor Day. A shorter school year and fewer vacation days would give nine-month employees the

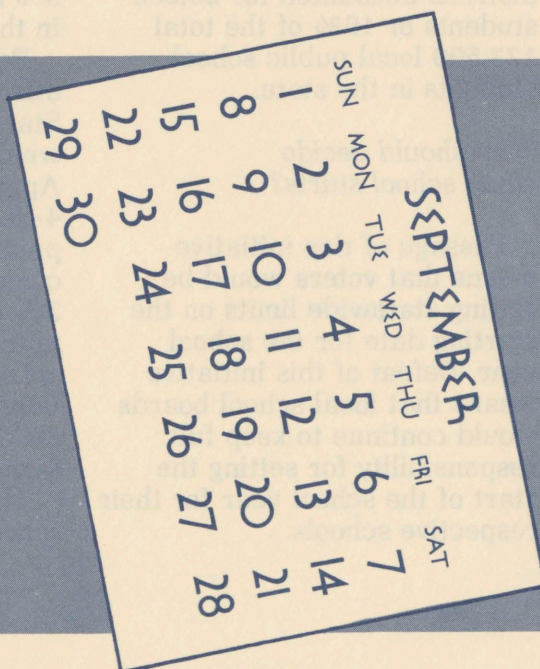
opportunity to work longer during the summer. It's a value judgment.

Who should decide the start of the school year? Should school start before or after Labor Day? Those are the decisions that voters will make in the November election.

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